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Mother tongue/ foreign language: speaking the self



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The pains of self-reflection

It has taken me much longer than I anticipated starting this account. The reason for this is that having jumped at the chance to collaborate in this publication, and having been sparked by the meeting organised in March with all the participants, where we shared experiences and perspectives, I have then found it unexpectedly hard to offer a coherent account of being an international academic. And I use the adverb “unexpectedly” because I have given some thought to the semantics of “being international” before. Not long ago I co-wrote a practical guide for HE teachers on how to motivate international students (Dolan & Macias, 2009); my input in the project was firmly grounded in my experiences and perspectives as a Modern Languages, non-UK born teacher. However, when it has come to reflecting on how this being international

manifests itself in other facets of my practice as an academic, I have found myself stuck, unable to tease out any thread that, on the face of it, could be of much relevance. Adamant that I wanted to go beyond the recounting of anecdotes that could illustrate cultural misunderstandings, I have struggled to find a frame for this reflective article. I have been plagued by doubts: why underscore difference on account of culture/nationality at all? Can such an approach yield any useful insight or will it help perpetuate an artificial divide? This is precisely what Sheila Trahar (2011) refers to as ‘conundrum’ in the introduction to the prequel to this volume, ‘The Doctorate: international stories of the UK experience’. Like the participants of that volume, I too offer my narrative here as a voice in a rich tapestry of voices, although I am not sure that mine necessarily challenges ‘more orthodox



narratives' (Ibid., p. 5) of academic experiences. In some ways, reflecting on my being international has taken me back to my doctoral research, which looked at female authored theatre and assessed, amongst other things, the impact of gender on writing. All the female playwrights I interviewed for my research felt uneasy about being singled out on account of being women and played down its importance. At times, my research felt like an impossible balancing act, trying to do justice to their testimonies and their understandable annoyance at the attention accorded to something as insignificant for them as their biological sex, whilst looking out for and finding traces of an awareness of being a woman in their writing. To what extent was I finding links, establishing a causality that could be also attributed to other factors and not just the fact that these plays had been penned by women? In an analogous way, to what extent are the challenges I encounter in the work place due to the fact that I am 'international' rather than the fact that it is simply a new protocol, say, equally confusing for my UK colleagues?

Another snag I have come up against is the style of the piece. It was made very clear to us that we

were free to use references or not, as we chose. While this freedom can instantly transform the writing from a chore — writing an academic essay — into a joyful task — writing a reflexive piece, I am aware that this will be largely read by an audience in academia. Furthermore, I realise that the aforementioned prequel to this volume was premised on the same freedom of style. I have been blown away by the range of experiences, as well as the level of self-reflection found in all the essays. However, one thing stands out: all contributors use references, though admittedly to different degrees. Paradoxically, it is some of the most critical contributors in that volume of the 'white male European ideas' and epistemologies (Ibid. p. 16) who make its heaviest use. Personally, I have no qualms about the ideological significance of using the kind of discourse prevalent in academia, possibly because I would probably be classified as belonging to the white dominant culture too. This does not mean to say that I do not find academic discourse alien at times. It clearly belongs to a very specific culture, the academic one, which not many people are conversant with. For me, it is just a way of packaging thought, and not always the most appropriate.

On this occasion, I am choosing not to make this piece too academic, as I want to feel free to tap into my own experience without having it mediated/validated by what other people have written before. I say this while I underscore that any insight I may offer has been informed by lived experiences of mine and others, by readings and by myriad encounters and conversations. I hope this will preclude the need for exhaustive referencing. I also feel that by writing in such a way, I am sticking my neck out, opening up to charges of having written a less weighty piece than might have been the case had I decided to reference my thoughts. I see something of an analogy between not using the expected academic discourse and the HE practitioner whose first language is not English. There is always a risk of inadequacy, and of not being perceived favourably because the medium in which you are delivering your content is not quite as polished and sophisticated. I stake my ground here.

Does one ever stop being 'international'?

I am not sure to what extent I fit the description 'international' as it is normally used in HE parlance. I have reached a point now where I have lived in this country longer than in the one I was born and brought up. When I read/hear the narratives of 'international' students, I can empathize with the sense of multiple estrangements, cultural, social, emotional... For me, this is just a distant memory; I can recall those feelings, but they are certainly not mine any more. I have become quite 'fluent' in my host culture, though by no means can I claim to have 'native' command of it. All my 'adult' experiences, as I have heard them being called,

are tied to this country: tertiary education, meaningful employment, having a family of my own, buying a house. I have a family and a network of friends, colleagues and acquaintances that give me a sense of belonging. And yet, an insidious sense of distance, of not being coeval with this country and this language, remain. Even after so many years I can still be confronted with behaviours that I have no hesitation in qualifying as 'odd' in my mind, before I set in motion the wheels of my liberal and politically correct awareness, accrued after so many years of exposure, that remind me that some of my own customs could be, indeed, are sometimes, described as barbaric. And again here, before I jump into impassioned defence of cultural practices that I would not defend back home, to my better judgement, I respond with equanimity and understanding of others' ideas of where I come from. I suppose that this type of mental and emotional juggling is what underscores concepts like 'intercultural communication', 'cultural capability' and such like. At times I feel I have become quite good at it, while other times I realise that there is no room for complacency.

I did my degrees in this country, and then, after a brief spell working as a tutor for the long distance programme of the University of London, I was appointed at my current institution. My experience of English higher education spans 20 years. This could lead one to believe that I am very well acquainted with the system here, but it does not always feel that way. The transition from a research student in HE to a practitioner of HE was fortuitous. I had never planned to become an academic, though now it is difficult to see myself doing something other. As a research student my aim was not a career in academia,



something that seems very unlikely amongst the PhD students I encounter now. I realise the context is very different and doing a doctoral degree is a huge investment that people understandably want to optimise. Devoting so much time and energy to researching a topic of little practical application just for the sake of it seems very naive now. Students these days are so savvy about writing for journals, doing conference papers and applying for university jobs that my lack of grasp of the functional value of doing academic research back in the nineties is almost embarrassing. I am still not sure if this absence of awareness on my part was somehow a failure to understand the system in which I was functioning, or whether I should treasure the reverence for learning which I vaguely recall from that time, a remnant of a different educational system perhaps, like my admiration for encyclopaedic knowledge.

Despite my overall familiarity with the sector and my working context, there are practices that I still label as 'different', though significantly I would not be able to articulate what I am comparing them with since I have no experience of academia in any other country. For example, I

have always been very taken aback by the fact that staff meetings and committees are scheduled during lunch time and that people eat through them. While I understand that this is totally acceptable here, I cannot bring myself to adapt to this. It is probably a productive use of time, but a deeply ingrained sense of appropriateness within me prevents me from adopting this practice. By the same token, I am still in awe at the formality and protocol used in all meetings, no matter how small. The agenda is sacrosanct; people speak in an orderly fashion, taking turns, putting their hands up; meetings usually finish on time. Not very much may be achieved, but I always leave with a feeling that the original plan has not taken any major battering. I do not know if in other places we would get to A.O.B.

I am confronted with new experiences from time to time, or rather experiences where I cannot take a back seat: representing language teaching colleagues on a steering group, chairing a committee, presenting to full lecture theatres on Open Days rather than just a bunch of prospective students, and so forth. I expect this is no different to any other job. Interestingly,

it is precisely at these moments when my awareness of being international comes to the fore, when I can be gripped by insecurities which I must consciously fend off. It is at times like these when I realise that I have not moved on enough from the proposition of 'being foreign' as lacking in something. Fleeting though this may be, doubting my own capacities and abilities can lead to a position of almost childish subordination, of expecting others to lead me and have the answers for me. I resent this and act with assertiveness, but the repositioning to a place of power and ownership is still conscious.

Let's talk about language

As a teacher of my own language and culture my expertise is always taken at face value. The foreign language teacher of her native language enjoys the unique position that her authority is never in doubt as her knowledge is embodied in a way that probably no other discipline practitioner can claim. Even though recent scholarship in foreign language learning and teaching has started to question the unassailable authority of the native speaker, the fact is that this authority remains untouched in the classroom and outside. This affords me a very comfortable space from which to teach. But this comfort comes at a price. Language teaching is not regarded as an academic discipline, but as a skill, and this in turn results in a lack of professional status for language teachers, the absence of any real career prospects, the casualisation of language teaching and a very widespread ignorance of what teaching languages entails or how we learn language, even amongst practitioners themselves. I enjoy what I do enormously. I love language,

any language. I enjoy learning new words and expressions in English, and I retain a genuine sense of wonder with each new discovery. This week, while reading the newspaper I learned two new words: 'glib' and 'jaunty'. I almost feel that gaps I was not aware existed have been filled. For a native speaker of English reading this, it might seem surprising that after so many years I still did not know them. Perhaps this can be a useful reminder that language command is often, though of course not always, the first tell-tale sign of 'being international'. These two words in question had certainly crossed my path before, and though I did not fully understand them, this lack of understanding must not have been a big impediment. On this occasion, they beckoned me; I felt they were important to the overall content of the article. Living in a foreign country, I am continuously reminded that learning a language is a lifelong endeavour. And also, that we do not need native size vocabulary to function in the target context: sometimes it is enough to know whether words are harmless or harmful. We can operate within a language community at different levels. Taking ownership of the foreign language makes me feel empowered. 'Glib' and 'jaunty' are now mine, and there is no going back. And this is the kind of power I try to instil in my own students. The fact that I have to speak a foreign language every day helps me enormously in my teaching, as it forces me to reflect on my own experience and difficulties. And this is how I try to lay bare the constructedness of my 'authority' as a native speaker in the classroom. I teach them words for them to take and make their own. I don't want them to feel that they are borrowing them, that they have to treat them as if they were somebody else's. I know that communication is



not about 100% accuracy, but about ease and confidence, even when one makes a mistake. This is the way most language testing, necessary as it is, is so artificial and can create so many insecurities in the learner. Another way of undermining my authority is by emphasizing the locatedness of my discourse: this is how I say it, how people where I come from may say it, but perhaps not further afield. No one can claim to represent a whole speaking community, although in the power dynamics of the foreign language classroom students are not easily disabused of such belief.

While I am aware of some of the tools that can help the non-native speaker place herself in a space of empowerment in a predominantly native speaker context, I myself can sometimes be a little overwhelmed by situations that involve high public speaking exposure. Though this may be something to do with public speaking in itself, the fact that English is not my first language becomes salient in my mind. I always do a little preparation in my mind of what I am going to say, even jotting down key words. I suppose the upside of this is that I do not stray off the main

point too much. I always feel that my performance in the foreign language could be taken as a measure of my ability as a teacher of a foreign language. Since I am supposed to facilitate fluency and advanced ability in my own students, I have to make sure that I can apply those learning methods to myself too.

Language also bears the chronology of one's experiences: names of new concepts or things that I have come across since being in this country tend to imprint themselves in my mind in English. Using the equivalent in my own language for 'feedback' or 'handout' seems almost contrived. In my personal and professional spaces, both languages co-exist quite happily, each filling gaps for the other. The long term foreign speaker immersed in the target language community may never achieve native fluency and accuracy, but parting with the foreign language after a number of years would certainly feel like a wrench.

After so many years in this country, I cannot really talk about cultural or linguistic *barriers* any more. The sense of cultural estrangement is very

mild, or at least tameable, and I barely register it at times. As for the language, I have developed a very interesting rapport with it, and for me exploring English, a second language rather than a foreign language now, is an unending source of fun — and frustration at times. However, there remains a subtle sense of distance from both the host culture and language, although I know that it can be approached from a positive premise rather than one of lack. When I manage to do that is when the fact of being international becomes an asset.

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